



Exercise: Progressive Muscle Relaxation

When we experience stress or anxiety during a difficult time at work, or are on high alert for a challenging task (e.g., giving a presentation), our body muscles tense up. Muscle tension is a part of our body's stress response (also known as part of the "fight, flight or freeze" response). Although modern day workplace stressors rarely pose immediate threats to our physical safety, our body does not discriminate between the types of factors *causing* the stress response, and our muscles tighten as our bodies prepare to face or run away from threats in our environment. Over time, if we remain in such a tense state, our muscles can become wound up and tight. This can lead to tension headaches, back pain, and neck pain. Increased pain can in turn elevate our overall levels of stress, starting a vicious cycle.

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is an exercise you can practice to help reduce your overall level of tension and prevent yourself from becoming overly tense again. PMR involves purposefully and systematically tightening groups of muscles. The basic premise is simple: when we purposely tighten our muscles and then release the tension, our body compensates by relaxing those same muscles. Through practice, PMR can allow you to become more in-tune with your body, so that when you feel tension you are more aware of it and can better help yourself relax.

To do PMR, find a quiet place free of interruptions, sit in a comfortable position, and clench various muscles, progressing from your upper to lower body (i.e., starting with the face, moving to the neck, shoulders, arms, hands, legs and feet). For each muscle group, clench the muscle(s) so that it feels tight (e.g., raise eyebrows as high as possible in order to tighten forehead muscles), hold for five seconds, and then release, feeling the warmth in your muscles as the blood flow changes.

If you have an opportunity to do some PMR in the workplace, you may find yourself less tense and stressed, and less likely to experience uncomfortable negative emotions. Not only can the act of doing PMR be beneficial to your muscles, but simply taking a few peaceful moments to concentrate on yourself can also help regulate stress.